



Problems in Classifying Gender Relations Verses: An Analysis of Musdah Mulia and Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir

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Abstract : This study addresses ongoing debates in feminist Qur'anic interpretation in Indonesia, focusing on epistemological ambiguities in classifying verses on gender relations. It aims to critically compare the interpretive methodologies of Musdah Mulia and Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, two influential scholars representing different feminist hermeneutical approaches. Employing qualitative library research with a critical-comparative and epistemological framework, this study analyzes their main works and relevant supporting literature. The findings show that Musdah Mulia promotes a humanist-feminist interpretation that prioritizes gender justice and equality as the Qur'an's primary ethical horizon. Although effective in challenging patriarchal interpretations, this approach raises epistemological issues due to its reliance on external ethical standards to distinguish normative from historical verses. Conversely, Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir's *Qir'ah Mubādalāh* treats all verses as normative through the reconstruction of reciprocal gender relations, offering greater structural consistency but creating tension between textual fidelity and hermeneutical reconstruction based on mutual ethics. This study concludes that both approaches reflect a fundamental structural problem in feminist Qur'anic interpretation: the absence of a coherent Qur'anic theoretical framework integrating ethics, textual authority, and methodology. It recommends the development of an integrative interpretive model grounded in internal Qur'anic epistemology to strengthen future feminist exegesis.

Keywords: Gender Justice; Qur'anic Hermeneutics; Normative vs Historical Verses.

INTRODUCTION

The development of contemporary Qur'anic exegesis reflects a significant epistemological shift from a normative-textual paradigm toward contextual, historical, and problem-oriented approaches. This shift entails not only methodological change but also a reconfiguration of how Muslims position the Qur'an in engaging the complexities of modern social life. Qur'anic interpretation is no longer understood merely as the reproduction of literal meanings or the reaffirmation of classical exegetical authority, but as a dynamic dialectic between text, context, and the interpreting subject (Irsyadunnas, 2014). Within this framework, the Qur'an is approached as a living source of values that

continuously interacts with evolving human concerns, including gender relations, social justice, and human rights.

One of the most prominent expressions of this shift is the emergence of feminist Qur'anic interpretation, which arose as a critique of classical tafsir shaped by patriarchal epistemological structures and androcentric discourses in both scholarly authority and meaning production (Mustaqim, 2008). This critique does not merely challenge interpretations perceived as biased against women, but interrogates the epistemological foundations of tafsir itself: who possesses interpretive authority, whose experiences are recognized as valid sources of knowledge, and which values implicitly function as the normative horizon of interpretation (Baidowi, 2009). Feminist tafsir thus operates simultaneously as an academic project and an ideological critique of power relations in Islamic knowledge production.

Despite its critical potential, feminist tafsir has generated unresolved methodological and epistemological problems, particularly concerning the classification of Qur'anic verses on gender relations. Many Muslim feminist scholars, such as Kecia Ali, divide verses into egalitarian or progressive verses aligned with gender equality and verses considered patriarchal or hierarchical, a pattern that often produces interpretive inconsistency (Ali, 2006). For example, Q.S. al-Nisā' [4]:1, which affirms a shared human origin (*min nafsin wāḥidah*), is frequently treated as a universal egalitarian principle, whereas Q.S. al-Nisā' [4]:34, with its concept of *qiwāmah*, is commonly categorized as a context-bound ruling shaped by patriarchal Arab society. The differing normative status assigned to verses within the same chapter is rarely justified through systematic methodological reasoning and instead appears driven by predetermined ethical commitments. This pattern risks rendering interpretation apologetic, reducing the Qur'an to a selectively filtered text rather than a coherent normative system.

This study is grounded in a critical epistemology of tafsir that integrates philosophical hermeneutics with contemporary Islamic epistemological critique. From this perspective, interpretation is understood as a practice of knowledge production embedded with normative assumptions, ethical horizons, and power relations. Without rejecting the pursuit of gender justice, this research critically examines whether feminist interpretive agendas are supported by coherent, consistent, and academically accountable methodologies. In the Indonesian context, this epistemological tension is distinctly articulated in the thought of Musdah Mulia and Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, two figures frequently positioned as central representatives of feminist Qur'anic interpretation. Previous studies have tended to examine their works descriptively or affirmatively, leaving the problematic dimensions of their interpretive strategies insufficiently examined.

Epistemologically, Musdah Mulia and Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir represent two contrasting strategies in addressing gender-related verses. Musdah Mulia advances a humanist-feminist interpretation that prioritizes substantive equality and justice, understanding the Qur'an primarily as an ethical text conveying a universal humanistic vision (Mulia, 2003). Consequently, verses perceived as hierarchical are often treated as context-specific and no longer normatively

binding, an approach effective in critiquing patriarchal interpretations but prone to classifying verses based on compatibility with a predefined egalitarian vision. In contrast, Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir's *Qirā'ah Mubādalāh* rejects the dichotomy between egalitarian and patriarchal verses by maintaining the normative status of all verses and reinterpreting them through reciprocal gender relations grounded in mutuality (Kodir, 2019). While this approach preserves textual integrity, it generates epistemological tension between claims of textual fidelity and hermeneutical reconstruction based on ethical reciprocity not always explicit in the text. By placing these two approaches in direct comparative dialogue, this study seeks to clarify whether they offer a genuine resolution to the methodological impasse of feminist tafsir or reproduce similar epistemological patterns in new forms, thereby contributing to the development of a more coherent and accountable gender-sensitive methodology in contemporary Qur'anic studies.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative library-based research design employing a critical-comparative approach. It focuses on an epistemological analysis of feminist Qur'anic interpretation, particularly the classification and interpretation of verses concerning gender relations. This design is intended to uncover differences in epistemic frameworks, methodological assumptions, and ethical horizons that shape the interpretive constructions of each scholar. The data consist of primary and secondary sources. Primary data include key works by Musdah Mulia, *"Ensiklopedia Muslimah Reformis, Keadilan dan Kesetaraan Gender Perspektif Islam, and Kemuliaan Perempuan dalam Islam"* and Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir's *Qirā'ah Mubādalāh*. These texts are selected for their representativeness of each scholar's core ideas, direct engagement with Qur'anic gender discourse, and significant influence within Indonesia's progressive Islamic thought. The units of analysis are the concepts, arguments, and hermeneutical strategies employed in classifying gender related verses, particularly those addressing leadership, *qiwāmah*, and male female relations. Secondary data comprise scholarly books and journal articles that analyze, critique, or contextualize their interpretations.

Data are collected through systematic documentation of relevant primary and secondary literature on Islamic feminism, gender oriented tafsir, and Qur'anic epistemology. Data analysis is conducted through four stages: data reduction focusing on texts addressing verse classification; discourse analysis to identify epistemological assumptions, ethical orientations, and methodological frameworks; critical comparative analysis of similarities and differences in interpretive strategies, especially regarding verse normativity; and epistemological synthesis to formulate theoretical implications for feminist Qur'anic tafsir. Research credibility is ensured through source triangulation and critical reflexivity, acknowledging the researcher's normative position to maintain transparent, rigorous, and academically accountable interpretations.

RESEARCH RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Analysis of Musdah Mulia's Thought: Verse Classification and Epistemological Tensions

Musdah Mulia's interpretive project is grounded in the epistemological assumption that the Qur'an inherently articulates a universal ethical vision centered on justice, equality, and respect for human dignity. Within this framework, Qur'anic interpretation is not treated merely as a textual exercise but as an intellectual effort to recover the universal moral intent of revelation from historical distortions produced by patriarchal interpretive traditions. This assumption underlies what Mulia terms a feminist-humanist exegesis, namely an approach that places human dignity and gender justice as its primary normative orientation (Mulia, 2020). A critical discourse analysis of Mulia's works, however, reveals a significant epistemological issue, particularly in her method of classifying verses and determining their normative status. Concepts such as human rights, *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, and substantive justice function not only as ethical horizons but also as evaluative instruments for distinguishing between verses considered universal normative and those treated as historical contextual. As a result, the epistemic authority of a verse is not derived solely from the internal logic of the Qur'anic text but from its conformity with a prior ethical framework.

In this context, the thematic (*maudhū'ī*) approach plays a strategic yet problematic role. While it enables Mulia to construct a coherent narrative of the Qur'an's "progressive message" by linking verses that support equality and justice, it simultaneously allows for selective interpretation. Themes are defined in advance, and verses that do not fully align with these themes are often reclassified as historically contingent or normatively residual. Qur'an 4:34 illustrates this pattern clearly. Mulia interprets the verse not as establishing a universal and normative gender hierarchy, but as a contextual response to the patriarchal social structure of seventh century Arabia. The concept of *qiwāmah* is redefined as a situational social responsibility rather than an ontological male authority over women. She argues that principles such as consultation, competence, and justice more accurately represent the Qur'an's universal ethical message than gender based dominance (Mulia, 2011).

Discursively, this interpretive strategy constructs a binary opposition between "universal Qur'anic values" and "patriarchal social structures." Verses affirming moral equality such as Qur'an 4:1 and 49:13 are positioned as timeless ethical foundations, while verses implying hierarchical relations are excluded from the same normative status by being labeled contextual or historical. This asymmetry reflects an implicit hierarchy among verses determined by the interpreter's ethical horizon rather than by a consistent internal textual methodology. The use of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* and modern human rights norms further intensifies this epistemological tension. In Mulia's exegesis, *maqāṣid* function primarily as external normative standards such as individual autonomy, freedom of choice, and bodily integrity rather than as principles inductively derived from the Qur'anic corpus. Consequently, verses that are difficult to

reconcile with these norms tend to be reinterpreted, restricted to their historical context, or normatively neutralized.

Epistemologically, this model has broader implications for the construction of interpretive authority. When the classification of gender related verses depends largely on their alignment with predefined ethical ideals, the normative authority of the Qur'an risks being displaced by external value frameworks. Interpretation then shifts from a dialogical engagement between text and context toward a justificatory process for prior ethical commitments. While Mulia's approach is normatively progressive, it raises a fundamental methodological challenge for feminist Qur'anic exegesis: how to advance gender justice without reducing textual complexity or transforming interpretation into a vehicle for legitimizing modern ethical norms alone.

Analysis of Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir's Thought: Verse Classification and Integrative Strategy

Unlike Musdah Mulia, who explicitly employs global human rights discourse and feminist theory as corrective frameworks for Qur'anic interpretation, Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir develops *mubādalāh* as an internally grounded epistemological strategy to address gender bias within Islamic exegesis. Whereas Musdah tends to draw a relatively clear distinction between normative and contextual verses, *mubādalāh* does not operate through rigid categorical classification. Instead, it functions pragmatically by reconstructing the interpretive subject through the principle of reciprocity. In this framework, verses are activated based on their capacity to generate just and ethical gender relations rather than being assigned a fixed normative status.

Discourse analysis of Faqihuddin's works demonstrates that *mubādalāh* operates through a deliberate shift in the grammatical and semantic positioning of subject and object within Qur'anic discourse. Verses that linguistically designate men as legal subjects and women as normative objects are not read as affirming hierarchy, but are reinterpreted as reciprocal relationships between morally equal subjects (Kodir, 2019). Legal subjectivity is thus no longer determined by gender, but by ethical principles assumed to be intrinsic to human relations themselves. This strategy enables Faqihuddin to preserve the authority of the Qur'anic text while avoiding literalist readings that risk legitimizing gender inequality.

Qur'an 4:34 provides a central illustration of this approach. Traditionally interpreted as legitimizing male authority (*qiwāmah*), the verse is reframed by Faqihuddin as articulating relational responsibility rather than structural superiority. He does not reject the term *qawwāmūn* linguistically; rather, he relocates its meaning from ontological male dominance to ethical responsibility, protection, and relational care. In this reading, *qiwāmah* is not inherently tied to male identity but is understood as a contextual and negotiable role shaped by capacity, consultation, and collective welfare (Kodir, 2019). Consequently, both men and women may assume protective and supportive roles according to their

respective circumstances (Kodir, 2021). Here, *mubādalāh* functions not as a deconstruction of textual language, but as a discursive reconstruction of meaning.

Epistemologically, this approach appears more integrative than Musdah Mulia's feminist-humanist exegesis. Rather than evaluating verses against external ethical standards, Faqihuddin extracts reciprocity as an internal Qur'anic value. Universal principles such as justice (*'adl*), compassion (*rahmah*), and benevolence (*ihsān*) are treated not as external correctives but as deep ethical structures embedded within the Qur'an itself. Through this strategy, *mubādalāh* seeks to mediate between revelation, interpretive tradition, and contemporary demands for gender justice without openly confronting classical authority.

Nevertheless, discourse analysis also reveals unresolved epistemological tensions. *Mubādalāh* rests on the assumption that every normative directive in the Qur'an contains a reciprocal ethical counterpart. Yet not all Qur'anic linguistic structures readily support such semantic symmetry. In certain cases, the application of reciprocity risks flattening historical asymmetries and power relations embedded in the text in favor of an idealized ethical harmony. This tendency reflects a form of ethical homogenization, whereby verses emerging from unequal social contexts are compelled to speak in the language of mutuality.

Moreover, verse classification within the *mubādalāh* framework remains largely implicit and functional. Verses that lend themselves easily to reciprocal interpretation are treated as ethically relevant, while verses that resist such treatment are subtly redirected toward historical contextualization. This indicates that, despite methodological differences, Faqihuddin—like Musdah—ultimately classifies verses according to normative orientation. The key distinction lies in epistemological vocabulary: Musdah relies on global human rights discourse, whereas Faqihuddin articulates ethical commitments through Islamic conceptual language.

The principal strength of *mubādalāh* lies in its capacity to offer an ethical, dialogical, and context sensitive interpretation while maintaining continuity with the Islamic tradition. However, it also raises a critical epistemological question: to what extent can reciprocity function as a universal hermeneutical principle without simplifying the complex power relations embedded in the Qur'anic text? This question marks both the productivity and the vulnerability of *mubādalāh* as a contemporary interpretive strategy.

The epistemological implications of Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir's approach extend beyond textual interpretation to the reconfiguration of interpretive authority in contemporary Islam. By positioning reciprocity as a primary hermeneutical principle, *mubādalāh* shifts authority away from literal textual structures toward an assumed ethical-relational framework inherent in revelation. Interpretive validity is thus measured not solely by fidelity to literal meaning or classical consensus, but by the extent to which interpretation produces just, reciprocal, and welfare oriented relations. Tafsīr, in this sense, becomes an ethically transformative practice rather than a reproduction of textual meaning.

Academically, however, this shift raises concerns regarding epistemological consistency. When reciprocity serves as the primary interpretive criterion, the

boundary between textual meaning and ethical projection becomes increasingly porous. *Mubādalāh* risks functioning as a normative reading strategy that selectively activates certain verses while suspending the authority of others through implicit contextualization. Consequently, verse classification becomes difficult to verify methodologically, as it depends more on ethical coherence than on comprehensive linguistic, historical, and thematic analysis.

At the level of gender discourse, *mubādalāh* offers a nuanced alternative to rigid distinctions between normative and contextual verses, enabling a more dialogical intra textual engagement. Yet this strength also entails a limitation: by consistently directing interpretation toward reciprocity, the approach may underplay historical tensions and structural inequalities that form part of the Qur'an's revelatory context. While *mubādalāh* excels in articulating relational ethics, it is less effective in preserving social conflict as an analytical dimension of the text.

In conclusion, Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir's *mubādalāh* represents a productive and communicative strategy for contemporary Qur'anic interpretation, particularly in advancing gender justice within an Islamic epistemological framework. Nonetheless, it continues to face epistemological challenges concerning the universality of reciprocity and the limits of interpretive authority in reconstructing textual meaning. These challenges underscore that the core issue in contemporary gender oriented tafsīr is not merely the choice between internal and external approaches, but the formulation of a methodological framework capable of sustaining a creative tension between textual integrity, historical complexity, and the pursuit of relational justice.

Comparative Analysis and Epistemological Problems in Classifying Gender Relation Verses in the Exegesis of Musdah Mulia and Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir

The dialogue between Musdah Mulia and Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir reveals that the most fundamental issue in Indonesian feminist Qur'anic interpretation does not lie in a lack of commitment to gender justice. Both scholars clearly operate from strong ethical visions oriented toward equality and emancipation. Rather, the core problem concerns how Qur'anic verses on male female relations are epistemologically positioned within the broader system of meaning of revelation. The critical question is not which values are pursued, but how the text is classified, operationalized, and assigned normative authority within the interpretive framework.

In Musdah Mulia's approach, the Qur'an is understood as articulating a tawhīdic vision grounded in justice and equality. On this basis, verses that align with egalitarian principles are treated as universally normative, while verses that appear to affirm hierarchical gender relations, male dominance, or female subordination are interpreted as historical compromises between revelation and the patriarchal social structures of early Arab society. This model provides Musdah with a powerful critical tool to deconstruct discriminatory classical interpretations and to reopen Qur'anic gender verses for progressive reinterpretation.

Epistemologically, however, this approach raises significant concerns. The criteria for distinguishing between “normative” and “historical” verses are not derived from the internal structure of the Qur’anic text itself, but from external ethical horizons such as modern human rights discourse, gender equality, and contemporary women’s lived experiences. As Aysha A. Hidayatullah has argued, when equality is not articulated through a rigorously defined methodology, the selection of verses deemed to represent “Qur’anic values” risks becoming apologetic. Verses that support feminist objectives are maintained as normative, while ethically challenging verses are marginalized through claims of historicity (Hidayatullah, 2014a). As a result, the epistemic status of a verse may shift depending on argumentative needs, potentially reducing the Qur’an to a negotiable collection of statements filtered through modern moral frameworks rather than a coherent system with its own internal logic.

In contrast, Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir rejects the dichotomy between egalitarian and patriarchal verses and seeks to preserve the normative authority of all Qur’anic verses. His strategy lies in restructuring subject object relations within the text through the principle of *mubādalah* (reciprocity). Verses that literally position men as agents of authority are not read as legitimizing male superiority, but as articulating reciprocal ethical relations equally applicable to women. Epistemologically, this approach demonstrates greater consistency in maintaining the Qur’an as an integrated normative discourse, as no verse is explicitly excluded from normative status.

This textual consistency, however, generates a different epistemological problem. *Mubādalah* functions as a strongly normative hermeneutical mechanism that actively directs meaning toward reciprocity, even when the literal textual structure does not explicitly support such symmetry. Ethical equality is not removed from interpretation but internalized into the methodology itself. Consequently, the reciprocal relations produced are often normative constructions rather than direct philological or historical derivations from the text. While structurally coherent, this approach is relatively difficult to verify through linguistic and historical analysis.

The comparison shows that, despite their divergent paths, Musdah and Faqihuddin confront a similar epistemological problem: the absence of a well developed theory explaining how the Qur’an itself organizes gender relations as a complex system of meaning. Musdah resolves the tension between egalitarian moral ideals and hierarchically inflected social language by categorizing verses as normative or historical. Faqihuddin addresses it by reconstructing relational meanings without explicit verse classification. Yet both begin with prior ethical assumptions about equality rather than with a systematic textual analysis of how gender difference is structured across the Qur’anic discourse as a whole (Shofa, 2025).

This finding aligns with Mahbub Ghazali’s critique of methodological ambiguity in Indonesian feminist tafsīr. Rather than being resolved (Ghazali, 2020), this ambiguity shifts form: in Musdah’s work, it appears as uncertainty regarding the epistemic status of verses; in Faqihuddin’s approach, it manifests as

tension between claims of textual normativity and hermeneutical reconstruction guided by reciprocity ethics. More broadly, this problem is reflected in feminist interpretive practices that assert the Qur'an contains no inherently hierarchical verses while simultaneously relying on contextual and progressive strategies to reinterpret gender related texts.

Asghar Ali Engineer's distinction between normative–theological verses and sociological contextual verses has been influential in this landscape (Engineer, 1999). Yet, as Hidayatullah notes, such classifications are often applied inconsistently: verses supporting equality are preserved as normative, while those reinforcing hierarchy are contextualized (Hidayatullah, 2014b). Similar patterns can be observed in both Musdah's and Faqihuddin's approaches, despite their different epistemological tools. Furthermore, neither Musdah nor Faqihuddin offers a systematic classification distinguishing verses open to ethical reinterpretation from those containing legally definitive (*qaṭ'ī*) rulings. Faqihuddin does not clearly delineate fixed legal verses related to issues such as dowry, maintenance, waiting periods, or divorce, while Musdah similarly lacks a clear framework differentiating between devotional (*ta'abbudī*) and ethical contextual verses. This absence complicates prescriptive analysis and increases the role of the interpreter's normative subjectivity.

At this juncture, Kecia Ali's critique becomes particularly relevant. Ali argues that certain Qur'anic verses emerged within a patriarchal seventh century context and cannot be fully reconciled with modern egalitarian ideals without acknowledging their historical limitations. This tension is also recognized by Hidayatullah through the concept of *hierarchy verses*, which rejects both forced harmonization and methodological exclusion of ethically problematic texts. These perspectives underscore that the challenge of classifying gender related verses is not merely a matter of methodological disagreement among scholars, but a structural issue within contemporary feminist Qur'anic interpretation itself one that calls for a more coherent, non reductionist Qur'anic theory of gender relations capable of holding together normative ethics, social history, and the internal structure of revelation.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the fundamental difference between the Qur'anic interpretations of Musdah Mulia and Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir does not lie in their shared ethical commitment to gender justice, but rather in how each manages the epistemological status of gender related verses within the overall meaning system of the Qur'an. Musdah Mulia adopts a normative reconstructive strategy that classifies verses according to their compatibility with an ethical vision of equality, resulting in hierarchical verses being positioned as historical and contextual rather than universally normative. This approach is effective in challenging patriarchal interpretations and foregrounding the Qur'an's emancipatory moral ideals. However, it also reveals methodological limitations, particularly the absence of explicit and systematic criteria for verse classification and the potential subordination of the Qur'anic text to external ethical horizons.

By contrast, Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir's *mubādalāh* approach seeks to preserve the normative status of all verses by reconstructing gender relations through a reciprocal subject object framework. This model offers a more integrative reading that maintains textual continuity and avoids excluding verses from normative consideration. Nevertheless, it is not free from epistemological tension, as the principle of reciprocity often functions as a normative construct that is not always directly derived from the linguistic or historical structure of specific verses.

The primary contribution of this research lies in its argument that the central challenge of contemporary Indonesian feminist Qur'anic exegesis is not merely methodological divergence, but the lack of a well developed epistemological framework capable of consistently articulating the relationship between revelatory normativity, textual historicity, and the ethical responsibility of the interpreter. While the study's conceptual epistemological focus allows for a deeper theoretical comparison of interpretive paradigms, it also constitutes a limitation, as the analysis does not yet examine the concrete legal or social implications of these methodologies in specific areas of Islamic law. Future research could expand this study by developing a more systematic model for classifying gender related verses and testing it through applied analyses of particular fiqh issues, such as maintenance, guardianship, or leadership. Such an expansion would enable a more robust evaluation of the epistemological coherence and practical reach of feminist Qur'anic interpretation. Ultimately, this study suggests that debates over verse classification in feminist exegesis reflect a broader and more urgent need for a Qur'anic epistemology that can coherently integrate normativity, historicity, and ethical commitment without reducing the complexity of the text or the interpretive process itself.

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